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DISTRIBUTION OF BULLETINS AND THEIR USE BY FARMERS

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DISTRIBUTION OF BULLETINS AND THEIR USE BY FARMERS[1]

M. C. Wilson,
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[1] Credit is due Andrew W. Hopkins, Wisconsin; (Chairman) W. P. Kirkwood, Minnesota; and J. E. McClintock, Ohio, of the Association of Agricultural College Editors; also to W. W. Clark, Wisconsin, for assistance in outlining and planning the study; and to the members of the United States Department of Agriculture and of the Universities of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio for assistance in collecting field data.

DISTRIBUTION: One copy of this circular has been sent to each extension director, State and assistant State county agent leader, State and assistant State home demonstration leader, State and assistant State club leader, and to each agricultural college and experiment station library.

DISTRIBUTION OF BULLETINS AND THEIR USE BY FARMERS

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INTRODUCTION

Bulletins and circulars have long been used to present the results of researches of the State experiment stations and the United States Department of Agriculture to farmers. More recently they have been extensively employed by the extension services of the State agricultural colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture as a means of teaching better practices in farming and home making. Owing to the difficulty of determining satisfactorily the influence of bulletins and circulars there have developed widely different opinions regarding the value of bulletins as an effective means of extending subject-matter information to farmers. As a consequence, quite different policies have grown up at various institutions regarding methods of distributing bulletins, though in some cases these policies may have resulted from legislative restriction of funds for printing and distribution of bulletins rather than from adverse opinion of administrative officials directly concerned.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF STUDY

The study reported in this circular was made at the request of and in cooperation with a committee of the Association of Agricultural College Editors, for the purpose of obtaining some reliable data on the use of bulletins by farmers and the effectiveness of the different methods of bulletin distribution. Considerable information was also obtained relative to the effectiveness of other forms of the printed page as compared to bulletins.

The data were collected by the survey method. All the farms in representative areas of Lyon and Blue Earth Counties, Minn.; Outagamie, Walworth, and Monroe Counties, Wis.; and Franklin, Miami, and Guernsey Counties, Ohio, were visited by a representative of the Federal or State extension service and comparable information obtained regarding the use of bulletins and circulars by the farm family (fig.1). The 1,676 records obtained represent approximately 95 per cent of all the farms located in the area studied.

No.__________ BULLETIN DISTRIBUTION SURVEY Date______________

Name______________________ P. O. Address______________________
Owner______________________ Tenant______________________

Are bulletins received, Wisc.______ Other States________ U. S. D. A. ________
How obtained: Mailing list________ Request________ Inst. or meeting________
County agent________ Congressman______ Schools________ Other________
Which method preferred?______________________
Are requests based on newspaper announcements?________ Bulletin lists?________
Are bulletins read?________ Are bulletins saved?______________
Suggestions regarding bulletins: Illustrations________ Length________
Type________ Language____________ Paper________ Other________

Reasons bulletins were never requested______________________
____

Bulletins on what subjects desired______________________
Bulletin lists desired______________ Prefer to write for bulletins________

Circular letters received______________ Posters seen______________
Weekly papers taken______________________
Daily papers taken______________________
Farm papers taken______________________
Home magazines taken______________________

Fig. 1 (a).- Obverse side of questionnaire card used in collecting data.

Have practices been changed due to information obtained from any of the following agencies:

Agency		Order of preference	Example of practices
. Bulletins	______	______	______________
. Posters	______	______	______________
. Circular letters	______	______	______________
. Weekly papers	______	______	______________
. Daily papers	______	______	______________
. Farm papers	______	______	______________
Home magazines	______	______	______________

ducation: Farmer______________ Farm woman______________

emarks:______________________
____

gricultural extension service of the University of Wisconsin and United States Department of Agriculture cooperating.

Fig. 1 (b).- Reverse side of questionnaire card used in collecting data.

BULLETIN DISTRIBUTION

Nearly 62 per cent of the farm families interviewed reported that one or more bulletins from the State agricultural college or the United States Department of Agriculture had been received (Table 1). Fifty-one per cent of the farmers had received bulletins from the State agricultural college or experiment station and 37 per cent had had bulletins from the United States Department of Agriculture. Of the three areas included in the study, the highest percentage of farmers receiving bulletins (71 per cent) was in the Wisconsin area. This was largely due to wider circulation of State bulletins. The lowest percentage of farmers getting bulletins (54 per cent) was in the Ohio area. This decreased percentage was apparently largely due to a more limited distribution of bulletins from the United State's Department of Agriculture

Table 1. - Percentage of farmers receiving bulletins from United States Department of Agriculture or from State agricultural college

Item	Total	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Farm records obtained..........	1,676	404	657	615
Percentage receiving:				
Any bulletins................	61.8	58.7	71.1	53.8
State bulletins.............	50.7	44.0	58.6	46.7
United States Department of Agriculture bulletins......	36.6	39.6	40.8	30.1

HOW BULLETINS WERE OBTAINED

Considering all the farmers included in the study, nearly 26 per cent of them had received bulletins through general or special mailing lists maintained by the college and experiment station, or on temporary mailing lists established by county agents (Table 2). Twenty-two per cent of the farmers had asked for bulletins either from the State college or the United States Department of Agriculture. Bulletin distribution in connection with meetings reached 9 per cent of the farmers. Nearly 17 per cent had gotten them from their county agent. About 20 per cent, or one farmer in five, had received United States Department of Agriculture bulletins from their Congressman.

Table 2. - Percentage of farmers obtaining bulletins by different means

Method	Percentage of all farms			
	Total	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Mailing list	25.8	11.4	34.7	25.7
Request	22.3	17.6	28.2	19.0
Meetings	9.2	10.1	11.0	6.8
County agent	16.7	23.0	15.7	13.7
Congressman	19.7	14.9	27.7	14.5
Other ways	9.1	5.9	14.5	5.5

Differences in State policies regarding bulletin distribution are reflected in the methods of obtaining bulletins in the three areas. Mailing lists were a more important means of distribution in Wisconsin and Ohio than in Minnesota. A higher percentage of farmers in Wisconsin requested bulletins than in the other two States. The county agent was responsible for distributing many more bulletins in Minnesota than in the other two States. In Wisconsin nearly twice as many farmers received bulletins from their Congressmen as in the other areas. The schools and other agencies were also a more important factor in bulletin distribution in Wisconsin than in either Minnesota or Ohio. Three principal methods of distributing college and experiment station bulletins were reported: 41.7 per cent of the farmers who received bulletins obtained them through mailing lists, 36 per cent by request, and 27.1 per cent from the county agent (Table 3). In the case of the United States Department of Agriculture bulletins 28.8 per cent of the farmers receiving them obtained them through request, and 61.9 per cent received them from their Congressman.

Table 3. - Source as related to methods of obtaining bulletins

Source	Number of farms	Percentage obtaining bulletins				
		Mailing list	Request	Meetings	County agent	Congressman
Any bulletins	1,035	41.7	36.0	15.0	27.1	32.0
State bulletins only	419	47.7	26.0	11.7	23.6	3.3
United States Department of Agriculture bulletins only	184	5.4	28.8	3.8	5.4	61.9
Both State and United States Department of Agriculture bulletins	432	51.4	48.8	22.9	38.9	47.5

HOW BULLETINS CAME TO BE REQUESTED

Approximately one-third of those requesting bulletins were led to do so through bulletin lists and one-third through announcements in the papers (Table 4). The remaining one-third mentioned other reasons for sending for bulletins. In many cases previous receipt of bulletins resulted in requests for additional bulletins on other subjects. In Wisconsin the distribution of bulletin lists was responsible for nearly 50 per cent of the requests, with newspaper announcements second. In Minnesota, bulletin lists held third place. Newspaper announcements and other factors were about equally important. In Ohio, other factors led to bulletin requests about as frequently as newspaper announcements and bulletin lists combined.

Table 4. - Basis for requesting bulletins

Item	Total farms	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Number of farmers requesting bulletins	373	71	185	117
Percentage requesting bulletins due to bulletin lists received	34.6	18.3	46.5	25.6
Percentage requesting bulletins due to announcements in papers	32.4	42.2	33.5	24.8
Percentage requesting bulletins due to other reasons	33.0	39.4	20.0	49.6

HOW FARMERS PREFER TO GET BULLETINS

Of those farmers who had received bulletins 35 per cent preferred to have their name on a mailing list to receive new bulletins as published, while nearly 12 per cent indicated a preference to write for bulletins, and 5 per cent to obtain them from the county agent's office as needed (Table 5). No preference as to methods of obtaining bulletins was indicated by 45 per cent of the farmers who had received bulletins.

About the same proportion of farmers preferred to write for their bulletins in all three of the areas involved in the study. The percentage of farmers preferring to obtain bulletins through mailing lists and from the county agent are apparently closely associated with the emphasis placed upon these means of distributing bulletins by the colleges in the three States.

Table 5. - How farmers prefer to get bulletins

Item	Total farms	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Number of farmers receiving bulletins	1,035	237	467	331
Percentage preferring to obtain bulletins through mailing lists	35.7	16.9	50.1	28.7
By request	11.8	11.0	12.1	11.5
From county agent	5.5	9.3	1.7	8.2
In other ways	1.7	4.2	.4	1.8
Percentage indicating no preference	45.3	58.6	35.3	49.8

WHY OTHER FARMERS HAD NOT OBTAINED BULLETINS

Where no bulletins from the agricultural college and experiment station or the United States Department of Agriculture had been received by the farm family, an effort was made to learn the reasons why (Table 6). Two chief reasons were given. Lack of knowledge about bulletins or how to obtain them was reported in 42 per cent of the cases. In this group are included some who knew of bulletins but thought it was necessary to pay for them. The other reason reported for nonreceipt of bulletins was lack of interest in them on the part of the farm family, 52 per cent of those not obtaining bulletins being placed in this group. Many in this class were farmers who stated that they relied entirely upon their own experience and did not believe in "book farming." The percentages of farmers who did not know about bulletins or did not believe in them were quite similar for the three areas.

Table 6. - Why other farmers had not obtained bulletins

Item	Total farms	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Number of farms not receiving bulletins	641	167	190	284
Percentage who did not know about bulletins	42.2	30.5	51.1	43.3
Percentage not interested in bultins	52.2	61.1	42.6	53.6
Percentage where no reason was reported	5.6	8.4	6.3	3.2

ARE BULLETINS USED?

Of the 1,035 farmers who had received one or more bulletins, 86 per cent reported having read at least part of the bulletins received. (Table 7). Fifty-five per cent of those receiving bulletins saved them for reference. That some definite farm or home practice had been adopted due to information obtained from bulletins was reported by 62 per cent of the farmers getting bulletins. The percentage of farmers reading bulletins is practically the same in the different areas. There is also little variation in the percentage of farmers adopting practices from bulletins, the lowest percentage being 55 and the highest 64. It is evident that not only do a large proportion of farmers getting bulletins read them but they also make practical application of the information carried in them.

Table 7. - Percentage of farmers using bulletins

Item	Total or average	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Farmers receiving bulletins..........	1,035	237	467	331
Percentage reading bulletins.........	86.1	86.1	86.7	85.2
Percentage saving bulletins..........	55.3	54.9	60.4	48.3
Percentage adopting practices from bulletins.........................	61.8	55.3	63.6	64.0

It is interesting to compare these data with similar data from a study made in 1912 of 3,698 farmers in four sections of the country[1] (Table 8). At that time it was found that 43 per cent of the farmers reporting received bulletins, 84 per cent of whom read them, and 48 per cent of whom adopted practices from them. The increased distribution of bulletins and the higher percentage of farmers who make practical application of the information contained in them, are largely due, no doubt, to the development of the nationwide system of cooperative extension work beginning with 1914. With three out of every five farmers who receive bulletins making practical use of the information in them, there is no longer room for doubt regarding the value of bulletins in extension teaching.

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[1] Smith, C. Beaman and Atwood, K. H. - The Relation of Agricultural Extension Agencies to Farm Practices. U. S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Plant Industry Circular 117, 1913.

Table 8. - Bulletins received and information used

Prepared from data on 3,698 farms reported in 1912-13

Section	Farmers visited	Percentage receiving bulletins	Percentage receiving bulletins who read them	Percentage of farmers receiving bulletins who adopt practices
North Atlantic States..	1,285	41.5	83.5	50.5
Southern States........	1,001	41.7	79.4	35.3
North Central States...	707	38.0	93.3	56.1
West Central States....	705	54.4	84.1	53.4
Total or average....	3,698	43.3	84.2	48.2

LAND TENURE IN RELATION TO USE OF BULLETINS

Whether the farm operator is the owner or a tenant seems to make an appreciable difference in the extent to which bulletins are received, 18 per cent more of the former than of the latter receiving bulletins (Table 9). Nearly 42 per cent of the farm-owner group interviewed adopted practices based on bulletin information. This was true of 30 per cent of the tenants. When the proportion of those obtaining bulletins who make use of information received is considered, it is found to be approximately the same for both groups - 61.9 per cent for owners and 61.6 per cent for tenants. More owners get bulletins but apparently make no greater use of them proportionately than do tenants.

Table 9. - Land tenure as related to use of bulletins, based on reports for 1,676 farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ohio

Item	Percentage of all farms	Percentage receiving bulletins	Percentage of farmers in group using bulletin information	Percentage receiving bulletins who used information
Owners......................	70.1	67.2	41.6	61.9
Tenants.....................	29.9	48.9	30.1	61.6

EDUCATION AS RELATED TO USE OF BULLETINS

As might be expected, the educational training of the farmers and farm women played an important part in the use of bulletins. Where the farmer or the farm woman or both had completed the eighth or a higher grade in school, from 77 to 81 per cent of the farms visited received bulletins, while the information contained in the bulletins was put into practical use on approximately 60 per cent of the farms (Table 10). Where both the farmer and the farm woman had not attended school beyond the eighth grade, bulletins had been received in 56 per cent of the cases, while 31 per cent of the farmers made use of the information. The proportion of those making use of information received in bulletins was nearly 40 per cent greater where more than an eighth-grade education had been obtained. The fact, however, that more than half (55 per cent) of those with an eighth-grade education or less made use of information received in bulletins is evidence that a considerable portion of State and Federal bulletins have been written in simple language.

Table 10. - Education as related to use of bulletins

Education of farmer and farm woman	Percentage of all farms	Percentage receiving bulletins	Percentage of farmers in group adopting practices	Percentage receiving bulletins who used information
Both having common-school education or less	74.7	56.0	30.9	55.2
One having attended common school, the other some higher school	15.2	77.2	59.1	76.5
Both having more than common-school education	10.1	80.6	60.6	75.2

SOURCE OF BULLETINS AS RELATED TO THEIR USE

A somewhat higher proportion of the farmers who obtained State bulletins made practical use of the information in them than was true of those who received bulletins from the United States Department of Agriculture (Table 11). The fact that State bulletins are frequently somewhat more applicable to local conditions than Federal bulletins would readily account for this difference in effectiveness. It is probable that difference in methods followed in distribution of State and Federal bulletins offers a better explanation, however (Tables 3 and 12), since bulletins obtained in the same manner from the two sources were about equally effective. Where both State and Federal bulletins had been received, the use of bulletin information in connection with the adoption of farm or home practices was reported in 77.5 per cent of the cases (Table 11).

Table 11. - Source of bulletins as related to their use

Source	Number of farms	Percentage of total farms	Percentage receiving bulletins reporting use of information
State bulletins only	419	25.0	57.3
United States Department of Agriculture bulletins only	184	11.0	34.8
Both State and United States Department of Agriculture bulletins	432	25.8	77.0

USE OF BULLETINS INFLUENCED BY METHOD OF DISTRIBUTION

The study of the relation between the use of bulletins and methods of distributing them is limited to cases where bulletins had been received in but one way. Most farmers had received them in several ways.

Where bulletins had been requested from the State college and experiment station or the United States Department of Agriculture, a higher percentage (71 per cent) of the farmers made use of the information than did farmers obtaining bulletins in other ways (Table 12). This is but natural, as the need for the bulletin already existed or it would not have been requested.

The next most efficient means of distributing bulletins was through the county agent. Sixty-one per cent of the farmers receiving bulletins in this way made use of bulletin information. Where bulletins were obtained in connection with meetings use followed in 53 per cent of the cases. Practical use of bulletin information was reported from 51 per cent of the farms obtaining bulletins only through mailing lists.

Where bulletins had been obtained from Congressmen only, the information was put into practice in 25 per cent of the cases. Even this proportion of use to distribution is higher than some critics have estimated the use of bulletins however obtained. When it is recalled that the people in this group had not requested the bulletins sent, either by returning a checked bulletin list or otherwise, and had received bulletins in no way other than by mail from their Congressman, even this method of bulletin distribution would seem by the results obtained to be fully justified.

Table 12. - Methods of obtaining bulletins as related to their use

Method	Number	Percentage of total farms	Percentage receiving bulletins who used information
Mailing list only	169	10.1	50.9
Request only	151	9.0	70.9
Meetings only	36	2.1	52.8
County agent only	57	3.4	61.4
Congressman only	112	6.7	25.0

Unquestionably bulletins are employed most efficiently when sent out in response to definite requests or used by the extension agent to supplement his other teaching agencies. The further distribution of bulletins in connection with suitable meetings and subject-matter mailing lists would seem to be good practice if the above data may be taken as representative.

From the foregoing it is evident that the particular method of bulletin distribution is not so very important after all. It is more a question of getting bulletins distributed. All extension studies which have been made to date emphasize the value of bulletins as a cheap means of influencing farmers and farm women to adopt improved practices.

Where limited funds are available for printing bulletins it is doubtless best to limit distribution to requests and use of county agents. It may be good extension economy, however, to provide for a wider distribution than is possible through these two ways, even if the necessary funds have to be taken from other teaching means and agencies. So long as additional dollars spent on the printing and distribution of bulletins yield greater returns in terms of improved practices adopted than the same dollars would yield if expended in other ways, it would seem good business procedure to increase the allotment of funds to this teaching agency. It is well to remember, however, that bulletins kept on the shelf do not influence farm and home practices.

OTHER SOURCES OF PRINTED INFORMATION

In order to understand better the value of bulletins from the farmer's point of view, information was obtained regarding other forms of printed information on agriculture and home economics available to the farm families included in the study. Approximately 93 per cent of the farmers took farm papers (Table 13). More than 58 per cent of the farm homes received women's magazines regularly. Bulletins from the State college or United States Department of Agriculture came to 62 per cent of the farms. The extension circular letter was received from time to time by 29 per cent of the families.

Thirteen per cent remembered having seen posters issued by the colleges or the United States Department of Agriculture. Daily newspapers came to 79 per cent of the homes and weekly newspapers to 50 per cent. With the exception of posters seen and circular letters received, these percentages are quite uniform for all three areas studied.

Table 13. - Percentage of families exposed to various sources of printed information relating to agriculture and home economics

Agency	Total	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Percentage of families:				
Taking farm papers................	93.1	93.3	94.5	91.4
Taking women's magazines..........	58.8	69.1	57.4	53.5
Obtaining bulletins...............	61.8	58.7	71.1	53.8
Receiving extension circular bulletins.........................	28.7	23.8	41.4	18.4
Seeing extension posters..........	13.4	31.2	13.9	1.3
Taking daily newspaper............	79.1	80.7	69.3	88.6
Taking weekly newspaper...........	50.0	52.2	60.3	37.7

SOURCES OF INFORMATION COMPARED

The adoption of improved practices as the result of information obtained from farm papers was reported by 69 per cent of the farmers taking such papers (Table 14). This is slightly higher than the percentage of farmers obtaining bulletins who reported use of information in them (62 per cent). Information from women's magazines was used by nearly 41 per cent of the subscribers to such periodicals. Farmers receiving circular letters made use of the information in 28 per cent of the cases. Twelve per cent of those seeing posters obtained practical information from them. Agricultural or home-economics practices were adopted by 17 per cent of those taking daily papers and by 17 per cent of those taking weekly newspapers as the result of information contained in those papers.

Table 14. - Percentage of families using information from the different sources

Agency	Percentage of farmers exposed	Percentage of all farmers influenced to change practices	Percentage exposed who were influenced to adopt practices
Farm papers	93.1	64.3	69.2
Home magazines	58.8	24.0	40.8
Bulletins	61.8	38.1	61.8
Circular letters	28.7	8.0	28.1
Posters	13.4	1.6	11.6
Weekly papers	50.0	8.7	17.4
Daily papers	79.1	13.3	16.8

When asked to indicate the source of printed information most preferred, one-third of the farmers mentioned farm papers and home magazines (Table 15). Nearly one-sixth stated that bulletins were most relied upon. Only a negligible number placed other forms of printed page first. Again the percentages are quite uniform for the three areas involved.

It would seem but natural for farmers to place farm papers ahead of bulletins as a source of helpful information. The farm papers and women's magazines arrive in the home regularly each week or each month as the case may be. A wide range of subject matter is presented in each issue and much of the material presented relates to the work of research and extension agencies. In addition, the experience of practical farmers and farm women is drawn upon.

Table 15. - Percentage of all farmers expressing greatest preference for various sources of agricultural and home-economics information

Agency	Total	Minnesota	Wisconsin	Ohio
Farm papers and home magazines	33.4	34.9	33.6	33.7
Bulletins	15.2	8.7	20.5	13.7
Daily papers	1.7	1.2	2.1	1.6
Weekly papers	0.8	1.2	.6	.7
Circular letters	0.9	1.0	.6	1.1
Posters	.2	.7	.0	.0

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF BULLETINS

Although an effort was made to obtain suggestions from farmers as to how bulletins could be made more helpful, most farmers were frank in saying that they knew so little about the technique of bulletin publication that they were not in position to make constructive criticism.

With respect to illustrations, 35 farmers thought that more illustrations should be included, 98 stated that the present number was satisfactory, while two thought that fewer illustrations were desirable. This leaves 900 of the 1,035 farmers receiving bulletins who made no suggestions regarding illustrations.

The present length of bulletins was considered satisfactory by 74 farmers, 2 preferred longer bulletins and 80 shorter ones, leaving 879 with no suggestions.

With regard to size of type and quality of paper, very few offered suggestions and most of those simply stated that present bulletins were satisfactory in both respects.

A desire to have bulletin information presented in simpler language was expressed by 70 farmers. That bulletins were readily understood was reported by 74 farmers, leaving 891 farmers receiving bulletins who made no suggestions regarding the language of bulletins.

From the preceding analysis and from the observations of those collecting the field data, it is evident that farmers are not greatly concerned over many of the refinements in bulletins which are frequently emphasized by bulletin editors. Whether the bulletin is 24 pages in length or only 12 does not interest most farmers, provided the 24 pages are needed for a straightforward presentation of the subject. This is illustrative of the attitude of farmers toward most of the other factors entering into bulletin publication.

SUMMARY

The study is based on information from 1,676 farms in selected areas in eight counties of three States.

Bulletins had been received by 62 per cent of the farm families, State bulletins by 51 per cent, and Federal bulletins by 37 per cent.

The principal ways of obtaining bulletins were through mailing lists, by writing for them, from the county agent, from congressmen, or at meetings.

Nearly half of the farmers not receiving bulletins did not know about them.

Of those obtaining bulletins 62 per cent reported the adoption of improved practices based on information from bulletins.

Of the owners and tenants receiving bulletins practically the same proportion made use of the information in them.

Whether or not the farmer or farm woman had received more than a common-school education was an important factor in the use of bulletins.

Although certain methods of bulletin distribution were apparently more effective than others, the least effective brought good returns in terms of farmers using bulletin information.

Farmers made slightly greater use of farm-paper information than of bulletin information. In ranking sources of printed information, one out of three placed farm papers and home magazines first, while approximately one out of six placed bulletins and circulars first.

Farmers are evidently little interested in the exact length of bulletins, the number of illustrations, size of type, quality of paper, and other similar refinements, provided the bulletins are written in a reasonably interesting manner, capable of being readily understood.

-ooOoo-